



The Jules VERNE

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THE SULTAN'S ELEPHANT

The little giant's departure

**-15-
The leak**

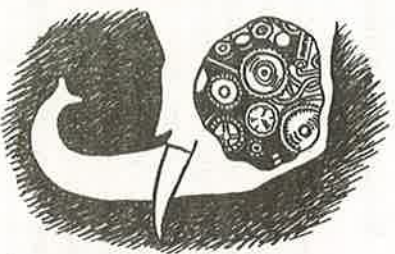
Communications between the people on the moon and those on the elephant got back to normal. However, we needed to find the leak, otherwise the moon would fill with seawater to form a new ocean. Luckily, only the moon was flooding, nowhere else.

We realised that we had not blocked off the elephant's earholes. The pressure of the water was such that a large quantity of it was infiltrating his skull, a very difficult area for us to get into - no one had ever ventured inside there. The complicated mechanisms packed into the skull by the elephant's creator made access for the crew impossible. This had to be resolved. The captain, for a moment baffled by yet another problem, saw what had to be done.

'Sir' he said to the chief engineer 'we cannot seal this leak from the inside. We're going to have to get out of this ocean as quickly as we can. Increase your speed...'

Two months went by. Encountering vast submarine plains, we accelerated the elephant's walking pace. He bounded along under the sea like a near weightless balloon. A few hours of this so exhausted the men, that the captain had to organise relays of help from the moon-dwellers. There was an incessant coming and going through the trapdoor which was kept permanently open from now on. Day and night the elephant maintained this demented speed. We were engaged on a real race against Time.

But soon we came to more submarine mountain ranges which had to be crossed. This meant working out our route again, negotiating massive rocks which we couldn't scale, getting lost in forests of floating seaweed, tall as trees brandished at the sun. After several weeks on the move, light began to filter into the gloom and soon our elephant was sinking into sand, then, with a titanic effort, he broke the surface of the sea. From the cockpit we looked out onto land, a brave new continent - Africa.



Our pachyderm stands, like a cathedral on an African beach, seawater pouring off him.

The sun rains down boiling anvils.

After long weeks spent under the ocean, the return to land is a joy. We take down the steel structures and erect the royal pavilion on the terrace again. With a row of strategically placed giant fans we try to blow the stifling air away from the workmen. They are sweating profusely and we take the opportunity to fill the large tanks.

On the moon, the waterfall has been halted and, gradually, the solar winds recover their former



equilibrium. Although some of the villagers prefer to remain by the lake, the rest are relocating to the day side.

The concubines exude pleasure and their euphoria imparts a wonderful serenity to the whole company.

The beach is deserted; there is not a sign of human life. We are probably too far from any kind of civilisation.

'Look' says the sultan. 'Our giant girl has passed this way.' On the very first tree we inspect, there are pebbles sewn to the branches. We celebrated with a big party that night but next morning the sultan was woken very early by the captain. An emergency.

The first light of dawn was hardly showing as we climbed up onto the terrace to see what appeared to be a large island floating towards us...the closer it got the bigger it looked. Not wishing to alarm the moon-dwellers, the council decided to leave the trapdoor open.

The new landmass drifted towards us for the next two hours. Presented with yet another fantastic vision we maintained a pro-

found, incomprehending silence.

The cartographer, summoned to the terrace with all haste, made and remade calculations and, when he had finished, his face lit up. He took the captain and the sultan aside and, in a restrained tone, said: 'Captain, that is Africa coming towards us...the entire continent.'

'What?' said the sultan. 'How can a whole continent float?'

'Well' the captain observed 'we're floating in space...' but the cartographer replied softly: 'It's

not that Africa is coming towards us, rather it's that we are on a floating island.'

Hearing this, the concubines burst out laughing wildly. This rattled the crew and the captain intervened. 'Gentlemen' he said 'we are afloat on a very different sort of vessel. I don't know by what sorcery, but the island we're on is drifting. Ahead of us lies the coastline of the African continent. An hour from now, we are going to cast off. You must all prepare to make another landfall. By great good fortune the sea is calm. Everyone to his post. As soon as we make contact we must get our elephant onto terra firma. We probably won't have much time...'

**-16-
African witchcraft**

In the end, there was no shock of collision when we made landfall on the African continent. Our beach simply merged with the other beach and all we had to do was walk off.

The next day we reached the desert and a sandstorm burst on

us without warning. At first we lay the elephant down on his side and took shelter behind him, but the storm grew ever more violent until it was a hurricane. Pinned to the ground and flayed by millions of grains of sand battering our flesh, we had to rope ourselves together lest one of us should be caught up into the air. Most of the crew had taken refuge inside the elephant but since his feet had a tendency to sink into the sand we hooked them up with cables like hobbling a camel. Thus we were, so to speak, afloat in the desert. The elemental forces were so powerful that the dunes heaved just like the waves of the sea. Luckily, we slid down them. Our vessel handled well both over the crest and into the trough, surfing quite blind on the shifting sands.

'We are drifting, majesty' said the captain after some thought, 'drifting but it's impossible to say in which direction. Our compasses have gone haywire, they're spinning round fast as propellers.' 'We will surely find out, captain. This storm will come to an end, just like the others. As long as the vessel holds up, we will be on our way again eventually. Come, come, my friend, where Time is concerned, patience is the key. Wake me, captain, when the tempest has left us in peace and do check the vessel.'

All the captain's fears evaporated. In fact, the tempest died away 15 hours later. We had a hard job getting the elephant back onto its feet. It took a full three days to clean through. The sand had got into every nook and cranny. The workings of the machinery were all clogged.



We'd covered a good number of kilometres when the engine room overheated and blew. Four mechanics were badly injured. 'Majesty, we've broken down' murmured the captain.

Everybody disembarked from the elephant. We were in the middle of a savannah: sparse bushes, a few trees here and there, an immense plain without a mountain in view. The heat absorbed all sound, not a breath of air disturbed what was a heavy, even, I would say, an ominous silence. The engineers were in a sombre mood.

'I'm afraid there's no chance of repairing the damage', one of them told the captain 'at least not for a long time...months.'

After a tour of inspection, the decision was taken to set up camp for as long as the repairs took. The concubines had lost none of their optimism. They affected to have not a care in the world and occupied themselves with a thousand and one things. They set free the hundreds of birds cooped in the palace hold - during the months of the crossing, notwithstanding the thousands of omelettes the crew had eaten, large numbers of birds had to be locked in capacious cabin trunks, because we couldn't eject them into the sea.



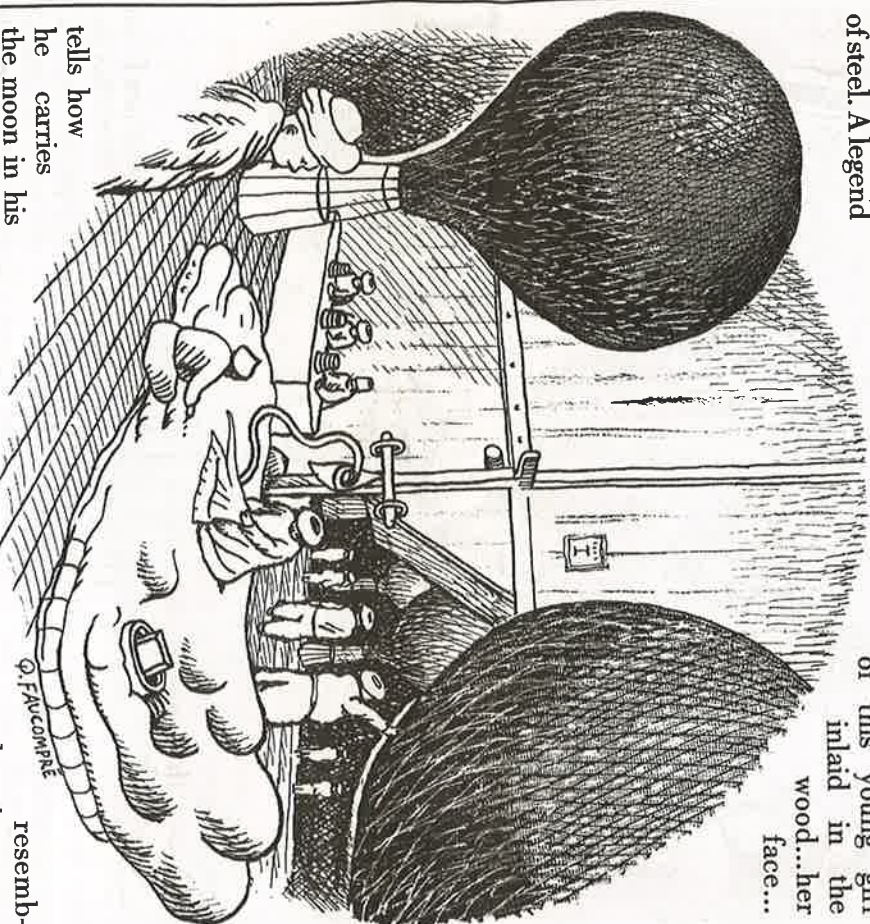
Suddenly, about twenty black men, almost naked, appeared out of nowhere in front of the elephant. They seemed to be totally stupefied by the pachyderm's gigantic size and the wood and metal of its fabric. The captain immediately told the crew to be quiet. Paying scarcely any heed to us, the Africans started talking all at once. (They carried but two bows and were, by the look of them, ignorant of firearms.) They behaved in such a peculiar manner as to suggest they must know about witchcraft. They chattered most animatedly for more than an hour, intermittently casting handfuls of pebbles to the ground and observing the positions in which they fell. We were all transfixed by this extraordinary spectacle - we couldn't take our eyes off them.

The setting sun unveiled a slice of moon and one of the witch doctors, whom I took for their chief, pointed his index finger at it. A tall huntsman stood up and slowly aimed his arrow at the moon. He bent the bow with such force that his arms trembled slightly. The arrow flew into the sky and was almost instantly swallowed up in the gathering darkness. The whistle of its flight seemed to pierce the night like a caress. Then, as if nothing had happened, the man sat down next to his companions who had gone quiet. Confused, we were wondering how this comedy would turn out, when the chief witch doctor stood, fixed his piercing, candid eyes on the moon. And...the wonder of it. The moon flickered several times, like a neon strip blinking into life, then its whole face blazed out in a radiance of light. Yes. The whole face. What had been no more than half a moon a few seconds before had turned to full.

We looked at each other, nonplussed, when something moved behind the witch doctor. It was as if a hand were stroking their heads, a huge, gentle hand: it was the elephant's trunk. He had woken up; he was alive, moving his ears, his eyes, his mouth and his tongue. He alone had repaired himself, by magic.

We listened to the reassuring breathing of the pachyderm. On the terrace, in an access of emotion, the concubines burst into tears. The engineers, flummoxed, tapped the sides of the elephant, made a tour of the engine room, reported every machine functioning as it should. The sultan, favoured by this miracle, went up to the witch doctor and shook him warmly by the hand.

The witch doctor jabbered some words which were incomprehensible to us. The interpreter ran up. 'The man says that he is proud to have met the spirit of the elephant of steel. A legend



tells how he carries the moon in his belly and that those who come near him will have the power to travel through Time. His people have been looking out for him for many years...The man says that he and his warriors would be happy to continue the journey with you. 'Very well. Agreed' said the sultan, ever prompt as a child to believe in magic. 'I name you Governor of the Moon.' A cry of joy echoed across the savannah and a number of them leapt up, arms outstretched towards the sky.



The message

After two months, during which we had crossed Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, we found ourselves in the Egyptian desert in sight of the Great Pyramid of Kheops. We camped next to it for two weeks, until the morning when the witch doctor came to see the sultan. He was carrying an object which one of our people had given him - an ancient casket which someone had found on the moon, made of jointed wood, fastened with silver studs its surface carved with arabesques. On the cover, illegible inscriptions ran round a picture showing the body of a small girl on the move. The sultan exclaimed at once:

'Well, captain... 'Well what, majesty? Is there a problem?' he replied, going over. 'The outline...' whispered the sultan, rapt in the image of his dream. 'I tell you that the shape

of this young girl inlaid in the wood...her face...

resembles in every detail the apparition that haunts my mind...what, then, is this new mystery?'

He held the casket up to his ear and shook it. He told us that it was not empty. Yet, oddly, the casket seemed to possess neither lid nor lock. The sultan handed it to the eunuch. 'Open it.' The eunuch scrutinised every facet of the box, then, placing it on the floor of the terrace, he broke it with his fist. The casket sprang open, revealing a hand-sized mirror set with minuscule shells. The sultan picked up the mirror and looked at himself in it. Retacent at first, he was soon having such fun, making faces into it, totally captivated by this new toy.

'Look, captain' he said, laughing 'the mirror follows my every expression exactly, which is by no

means unusual in a mirror, except for this: the face I see reflected is my face when I was five years' old.'

Taline, who was standing next to him, took the mirror from him and peered into it.

'Incredible. He's right, but it's not him I see - it's me, at the same age...five years' old.'

She also amused herself for a while, making all sorts of grimaces, like the sultan before her. So, the mirror passed from hand to hand, everyone playing with it, declaring, with roars of laughter, that this latest magic, albeit incomprehensible, was one of the most diverting.

Only the eunuch and the witch doctor refused to join in the excitement. They simply gathered up the small piece of material which protected the mirror and stood pensively a while. Then the eunuch spread the cloth on the table and tried to smooth out the creases: some words were written on it. He pointed to the writing with his index finger and stared at the sultan.

There was hush. We watched the sultan's eyes as he deciphered the phrases written on the handkerchief.

'Little giant on holiday. Will spend three days with the elephant, from 4 May 2006, in London, Great Britain.'

The court was bowled over.

'Good' said the sultan. 'Now we know when and where. We must plan our departure. I need all the engineers. I want the council to evaluate our position. I don't know what era we are in but, my word as sultan, we will be at the rendez-vous.'



Voyage by balloon

The atmosphere in the palace has never been as grave as in the two weeks that followed and although the river Nile is in flood at this season our men have to cross it in quest of huge quantities of material essential to the latest extravagant plan of the sultan's. He, with implacable logic, had found a solution: 'Listen closely' he said to the council of elders. 'After land and sea what is more obvious than to travel through the

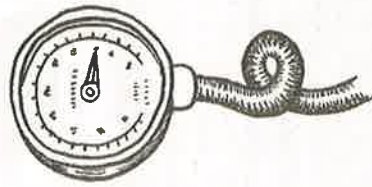
air? I urge the construction of a flying elephant.'

The captain and all the rest raised their eyes skyward. Here's another fine idea he's got into his head, they thought. The engineer, already assailed by the prospect of infinite calculations needed for getting such a substantial mass airborne, wanted to say: 'And when are we going to go into space?' But, seeing how thrilled our sultan and the concubines were with this brainwave, he demurred.

'I recommend the construction of a hundred hot air balloons to be arranged like a bouquet capable of getting us airborne. As for the gas, we will find that on the moon, enough to fuel each balloon piloted by a single aviator. To work, gentlemen. I want to see the floor of my terrace suspended in the sky within three months.'

So it came about that a sewing workshop was installed in a palm grove near the pyramids, employing more than 10,000 Egyptians. Tough linen had to be obtained, as well as ropes and tubing, all indispensable to the construction of the flying machine. Tests were carried out on each balloon, the mechanism refined, each pilot trained in the handling of his craft. Calculations as to how a mass of air functions under degrees of atmospheric pressure were checked. In short, it was a Herculean labour. Time and again we saw hot air balloons crash after a few minutes in the air or else explode as the pressure of the gas in them expanded.

Two and a half months later came the first attempt to lift the elephant with the balloons. The balloons, one on top of the other, bunched like flowers in a bouquet, did succeed in raising their vase off the ground. The elephant rose ten metres and bounced back down onto the desert of the pyramids. At last the flying machine was ready...



Will we, one day, understand the determination of human beings to melt into their dreams?

Thus it was that on 15 April 1985, we left Egyptian soil, cheered and applauded by the Egyptians gathered to wave us off: a crowd of 10,000 with tears in their eyes transport you, in a trice, above the clouds...

The elephant, suspended below a bouquet of hot air balloons, rose up into the sky. Manoeuvring such a contraption hit numerous snags. A control tower, manned by twenty dependable personnel, maintained constant communication with the aerial navigators via the speaking tubes. Losing pressure of gas was a continual source of anxiety. As the elephant glided along in utmost tranquillity, as if he were on a swing, among the crew there was a constant hullabaloo of shouting at every mishap, every leak. Some men climbed up the vertical mooring lines to check that they were holding, even to reinforce them.



On the moon, the transfer of gas posed a real problem. The gas field had been found on the dark side and, since sparks of any sort were forbidden, lighting was provided by phosphorescent fish, which had to be transported more than 10 kilometres across the mountains. These return trips were exhausting, not to mention the task of capturing the marine creatures. Further, as massive leaks broke out here and there, the teams had to be replaced regularly because of the risk of asphyxia. The entire chain of men, from the gas field to the pilots of the balloons, were in a constant state of nervous apprehension. We were on board a bomb primed to explode.

The sultan and the concubines were off on another dimension: 'Look' said Pamplona, grasping the captain by the arm 'we're approaching the Mediterranean. Just look at that ship, captain.' We were about 800 metres above

the surface of the sea when a fire flashed out - one of the balloons had burst. Fortunately the elephant hardly juddered. Then a second balloon and a third disappeared into thin air.

'But...they're firing up at us' shouted the captain.

The historic cartographer had recovered his radio on our departure from Egypt so he could, at last, listen to the news and pinpoint the dating of our voyage.

'We're in 1992' he said. 'There's a war going on down there...'

The captain did not think twice.

He got the elephant to trumpet - the alarm signal - and grabbed the megaphone. 'Maxi-

jerked up violently skywards. A few seconds later, the bouquet was above the clouds and stabilised.

It was, in truth, as if the marathon runners of ancient Greece had discovered the bicycle: we rocked in serene calm. Never would we have encountered such entrancing scenery had our sultan not had taken on this remarkable challenge to go round the world through the air.

Taline at once wanted to dive overboard, to swim in the cotton of the clouds, but the others held onto her firmly. Everybody was charmed by the cloudscape.

However, on the moon, they were frantic - another catastrophe about to hit. Several people lay near the supply pipes, half suffocated. The witch doctor Governor of the Moon, bellowed incantations, incomprehensible to the others. There were not enough people transporting the phosphorescent fish: the light was getting slowly dimmer. But now the captain spoke music to their ears: 'Drop pressure.'

And, within a few minutes, order was almost completely restored. The elephant began to sink down below the clouds and levelled out at 750 metres above the sea.

'Majesty' said the historic cartographer 'the storm is past, we are now in the year 2000 and soon we will be flying over Sicily.'

The sultan beamed with pleasure.

'Well, captain, our machine is on course' and the concubines, overjoyed, decided to climb up to the domes of the balloons: they wanted to stretch out there to sunbathe.

The speed of the elephant soon picked up and we were projected into the skies of 2006.

The approach to the rendezvous involved the entire company. Deceleration...acceleration...climb...descend...head for the city skyline to arrive at the point, geographic and temporal, of the rendezvous.

This was only today's adventure. I knew that plenty of others waited for us out in the far reaches of Time, as it were a proud epoch finding, once more, its dreams. 'We'll stop here for the night' said the captain...

mum pressure all balloons. Maximum pressure. We need to attain 1000 metres in thirty seconds.' I took the liberty of saying: 'But captain, what if we blow up?'

'In that event, Rouchkov' he replied testily 'we will fall from an even greater height.'

'Valves open' cried the second officer.

'Tack vessel with the ears of the elephant.'

'Look out, another shell.'

And a fourth balloon exploded.

'Quicker, inflate, inflate. Maximum pressure.'

On the moon, which was in direct contact thanks to the speaking tubes, they took all manner of risks. They unleashed so much pressure that fifty men on duty by the outlets on the gas field, had an almighty struggle to close the lids and then to keep them shut against an incredible force of escaping gas.

On the terrace, as a fifth balloon gave up the ghost, the elephant